# FOREWORD: THE POWER OF *TESTIMONIOS* FOR EMPOWERMENT

Mahmoud Suleiman
*Editorial Director*

Last summer, I was invited to speak at the Fulbright Pre-Departure Orientation sponsored by the State Department and the Institute of International Education (IIE). The four-day event hosted the outgoing cohorts of Fulbright grantees. My sessions focused on my own experiences during my previous Fulbright scholarships where I completed my residency in two countries in the Middle East region. Typically, such meetings would take place in Washington, DC, but organizers from the State Department and the Institute of International Education felt it would be more fitting to hold the conference in Detroit, Michigan instead. So we gathered for a few days in Detroit for a series of orientations, workshops, presentations and related events that were held at Wayne State University campus. The activities also included field trips to landmark sites in the Detroit metropolitan area including a visit to the Arab American Museum. We went for a tour inside the museum and listened to presentations about the Arab migration into the states throughout history. We learned about the Arab American experiences and their plight, triumphs and tribulations, along with their survival especially during the times of heated conflicts that frequently erupt in the region they left many decades ago. More importantly, we were fascinated by the untold stories of Arab American heroes and heroines, science pioneers and inventors, historical figures, high profile officials in various branches of the United States government, and many influential figures whose names and stories seemed to have been written in water. Artifacts, photos, maps, artwork, historical documents, and other materials were displayed along with audio-recorded narratives that archive the journey of Arab Americans to the new world; the testimonials spoke volumes of the unheard stories about this unique group of Americans who have been invisible in many ways.

Although Michigan has the largest concentration of Arab Americans outside the Middle East, California has the largest Arab American population in the United States. In fact, last year the California State Senate unanimously adopted a Senate Concurrent Resolution (SCR) 22 proclaiming April as the Arab American Heritage Month in recognition of the Arab American contributions to the state of California and beyond. The resolution was authored by State Senator Ling Ling Chang, a representative of a district known as *Little Arabia*, who delivered a speech highlighting the great contributions of Arab Americans and called for combating and rejecting all forms of bigotry and hate.

Unfortunately, like so many minority groups, stories about Arab Americans are told by others rather than by their authentic testimonials. Images of Arab Americans have been incubated in the minds of the public based on stereotypical pictures and false perceptions which have made them visible in negative ways (Maleh & Maleh, 2009; Nieto, 2004; Suleiman, 2004; Suleiman, 2010). Their stories and voices have been tarnished and distorted in various media discourses and the Hollywood movie industries. Even before 9/11, the immigrants from the Middle East, including the already settled Arab American minorities, have dubiously become, according to renowned journalist and author Nicholas Von Hoffman (as cited in Orfalea, 1998), “the last ethnic

group safe to hate in America" (p. 5). This unpleasant status has reinforced Arab American silence (Orfalea,1998), especially in social, political, and educational institutions.

Their children continue to carry the burden of their identity and heritage. They feel left out of the American dream of their previous generation. They attend schools with clouds and cycles of ignorance circling around them. They look for a glimmer of hope that someday somehow affirmation might come their way in their interactions with people around them. In fact, this brings home a story of one of my own children. So let me share her story when she was in second grade many years ago.

One of my youngest daughters was an avid reader who was hooked on books and participated in incentive driven accelerated reading programs throughout her elementary school years. She used to spend a lot of time at the library reading books; she also always took advantage of the library book sales. Stories of peoples and places across the globe always fascinated her and fostered her human pride. Whenever she heard about book sales during weekends at the local library, she would grab a few empty shopping bags, go there and bring them back full of books.

One day, she came home excited and hastily wanting to share with me a book the teacher read to her class. She borrowed that book that day from the school library, and made sure to bring it home to share with me after school. The story book was about Columbus's journey to America.

*"Dad, this is a special story," she said.*

*"All books and stories you have been reading are special, why this one?" I replied.*

*"No, this one is different and you are going to like it," she explained.*

*"I like the books you read… what makes this different?" I asked.*

*"Because it has something we like… and you will like it too," she said.*

*I asked her if she could read it to me? Then, she enthusiastically opened to the page she bookmarked and pointed to one word and said, look!*

*I said, "Okay, why don't you read the page to me?"*

*She repeated, "No! look!" as she zoomed in on the word "Arabic," stating, "I know you like this word and I like it too … and it's in this book our teacher read to our class today."*

*I asked, "why don't you at least read the sentence to me?"*

*She read, "… And Columbus had an Arabic interpreter on the ship?"*

*I asked, "why do you think he had an Arabic interpreter on the ship?"*

*She said, "I don't know… the teacher never told us," as she wondered "what is an interpreter?"*

I translated to her the word and explained what an interpreter does. Afterwards, she became curious about why Columbus needed an Arabic interpreter on the ship. I explained to her about the spread of the vibrant and dynamic Arab and Muslim civilizations that dominated much of the African continent, the Middle East, central Asia including India, in addition to the several hundred years of reign in *Andalusia*, modern-day Spain. Historically, as Schwartz (2001) noted, "… east/west contact bore the most fruit wherever Arabs and Europeans lived or worked together" (pp. 68-69). For example, "Muslim Spain was one of the most cosmopolitan and multicultural societies in human history" (p. 68), and had experienced one of its most thriving eras which universally appealed to many other civilizations as a model to emulate. Arabic was the *lingua franca*, a language largely used in the international arena. Our conversation soon turned into a social science and history talk which instigated more intrigue and interest in my little child.

Seeing the excitement that only one word (the word Arabic) my child identified with in a story read in her class was amazing. Even without knowing the historical context about the place of Arabic as a *lingua franca* at the time, the impact was noteworthy. Although the teacher and the

curriculum did not address the significance of such socio-historical facts and the place of the Arab and Muslim civilizations throughout history, the word has uplifted her spirit and increased her motivation and pride. I could only imagine how much impact on my child and all learners who could see themselves in the curriculum and instruction process when the pedagogy is relevant and responsive to them building on their sociohistorical capital and contributions to human civilization. One can also imagine if the story or the school curriculum affirmed more of her cultural, ethnic, and historical being beyond one word. Unless the curriculum and instruction seek to intentionally affirm the physical, intellectual, linguistic, and cultural being of all students as a core element of culturally responsive pedagogy, students will continue to flounder about how their identity, heritage, voice, and pride are reflected in the school culture (Suleiman, 2020).

For thousands of years, stories and counter-stories have played a large role in portraying the world of reality around us. In particular, the power of *testimonios* has been acknowledged by past and modern scholars, educators, and researchers. For instance, the Platonic wisdom, which suggests, "those who tell the stories rule society" underscores the importance of needed social justice activism through authentic story-telling to empower all citizens so that they are engaged socially, emotionally, and culturally in the diverse society. As such, their authentic voices should be told and heard because, as Savi Sharma teaches us, *everyone has a story*!

Having this in mind, the Center for Leadership, Equity and Research (CLEAR) continues to serve as a platform to give voice to the voiceless through its mission and core research strand by committing to the publication of the newly adopted title for its journal: *Journal for Leadership, Equity, and Research (JLER)*. In an effort to broaden our reach, we have been extremely fortunate to have two renowned scholars who compiled this special edition focusing on themes that revolve around the power of *testimonios*, *cultural proficiency*, *emancipation* and other intricately related strands within the fields of social justice and equity. The guest editors Drs. Sophia Rodriguez and Gilberto Q. Conchas who have a remarkable history of *walking the talk and talking the walk* add richness to the center and its research agenda. As they pointed out in their introduction to this volume, this "special issue is a collection of theoretical, empirical, and practice/policy-based social justice studies in education and community-based settings" that have no boundaries. Readers of this volume will be engaged at the highest level of intellectual discourse given the depth and breadth of the various articles that have all sorts of appeal for anyone genuinely interested in social justice and equity. Moreover, the collections of articles contributed by the high caliber of authors and social justice advocates are thought-provoking and provide key ingredients for engaging anyone in courageous conversations around the issues of race and racism. Needless to say, these are by no means rhetorical pronouncements made by the contributors; rather, these are action-oriented research accounts that are deeply rooted in solid epistemologies and empirical experiences of people yearning for equity and social justice across the globe. In short, as Dr. Ricardo D. Stanton-Salazar concluded in his commentary on this volume, "the work of this larger community of scholars is both ontologically and epistemologically diverse; that is, notable variations exist in theoretical perspective, research methodology, the role of research participants and the nature of their knowledge."

Finally, readers of this volume will find themselves compelled to act upon the implications of each article given their powerful and didactic appeal. Apart from learning from the content, they will find themselves learning about the authors and their unconditional commitment, caring, courage, and resilience to bring about desired change through research-activism in schools and society at large. I am reminded by Dr. Ken Magdaleno's words of wisdom that "*You don't do it to save the world… You don't do it to change minds… You do it because you* ***can't not*** *do it…"*

The guest editors, the contributors, as well as the reviewers for this volume reflect this selfless spirit and a non-neutral stance by sharing voices loudly and forcefully to give voice to the powerless!

## REFERENCES


Maleh, L., & Al Maleh, L (Eds.). (2009). *Arab voices in diaspora: Critical perspectives on Anglophone Arab literature.* Leiden, The Netherlands: Rodopi and Hotie Publishing.

Nieto, S. (2004). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education (4th ed.)*. New York: Longman.

Orfalea, G. (1998). *Before the flames: A quest for the history of Arab Americans.* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Schwartz, R. (2001). Unity in multiplicity: Lessons from Alhambra. *Thought and Action, 17*(1), 63-75.

Suleiman, Mahmoud. (2004). Image making and invisible minorities. In Geg Goodman & Karen Carey, *Critical multicultural conversations, (pp. 79-91*). Cresskill, NY: Hampton Press, Inc.

Suleiman, Mahmoud. (2020). Cultivating diversity through multicultural literature. In Bre Evans-Santiago, *Mistakes we have made: Implications for social justice educators, (pp. 129-150).* Gorham, ME: Myers Education Press.

Suleiman, Michael (Ed.). (2010). *Arabs in America: Building a new future*. Temple University Press.